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# MARIVAU AND MARIVAUDAGE

BY RICHARD ALDINGTON

A REPRINT of Marivaux's rare *Spectateur Français* raises several points of interest which it would be pleasant to discuss, but this note will be limited to two or three only, since even the ablest commentators on Marivaux have noted the difficulty and perplexity of the problems involved. Perhaps this was only a means to avoid praising a man who had great, but not conventionally great, literary talents. The most obvious thing about Marivaux, the label which is attached to him historically, is the fact that his style has added the word *marivaudage* to French critical jargon. That estimable work the *Petit Larousse*, which may be called the encyclopædia of the French populace, describes *marivaudage* as "*Langage affecté, dépourvu de naturel, comme celui de Marivaux.*" Voltaire, Grimm, Collé, Marmontel, La Harpe, d'Alembert, Sainte-Beuve, and Professor Saintsbury have all written on Marivaux and define his qualities with precision and ingenuity. The sentence of the *Petit Larousse*, if a little abrupt and decisive, as popular judgments are apt to be, is probably founded on the consensus of opinion of the eminent authorities named. With attenuating circumstances, then, *marivaudage* is a literary vice, in the opinion of the great critics, and we must either accept this opinion or run the risk of disagreeing with the authorities. True, Marivaux has been vigorously defended by recent editors (G. Larroumet is the most famous) and by novelists like Alphonse Daudet and Gautier, but what is their praise set against the just, kind, pondered, but inevitable judgment of Sainte-Beuve and Professor Saintsbury? It really looks as if judgment had been given already (without appeal) against the admirers of Marivaux, and that to praise his work as enjoyable and his style as agreeable, if highly personal, is simply to be as "singular" as Marivaux.

Even Sainte-Beuve, who had something in common with Marivaux, who wrote of his "*simplicité exquise, coquette, attentive,*

*résultat d'un art consommé*," could remark later on in a passage of great critical beauty: —

. . . *qui dit "marivaudage" dit plus ou moins badinage à froid, espièglerie compassée et prolongée, pétilllement redoublé et prétentieux, enfin une sorte de pedantisme sémillant et joli . . .*

Were it not that he goes on immediately to say that "*l'homme vaut mieux que la définition*," the admirer of Marivaux would be completely disconcerted and feel that there was nothing to do but to keep his admiration to himself. Yet it would be interesting to hear from a thoroughgoing French classicist just why *Le Jeu de l'Amour et du Hasard* is definitely inferior (not different from, but inferior) to, say, *Georges Dandin* and *L'Étourdi*; or, again, why *Marianne* (which, as Professor Saintsbury justly says, is related to the novels of Samuel Richardson) is to be dismissed as *marivaudage* (the better critics do not, of course) when one might be tempted to examine it as a distant predecessor of the *écriture artiste*, and even of the style of Henry James and Marcel Proust. One can do no more than hint at these possibilities, whose development requires many pages of analysis; but they may be recommended to any critic who dares to attempt the whole problem of Marivaux.

The paragraph quoted by Sainte-Beuve as a specimen of *marivaudage* is taken from the *Spectateur Français*. But before considering the literary qualities of that work it may be interesting to recall how it was that Marivaux came to start a French *Spectator*. It will be remembered that he was the son of a wealthy man and therefore was able to write at his own time and in his own style. Unfortunately he lost his money, soon after his marriage, in the French South Sea Bubble, Law's Mississippi Scheme. As Marivaux was unable or unwilling to work he looked to his pen for support; and since his plays were insufficient to provide for his needs and the pensions he received later from Helvétius and Madame de Pompadour could not supply a man so incorrigibly tender-hearted and generous, he naturally drifted into journalism. But all his tendencies and earlier training were against him in his attempt to rival Addison and Steele. He made the mistake of working without a collaborator to aid him when

his wits were at fault, so that he early fell into that fatal journalistic mistake of failing to appear to date. The first number started off well with a charmingly light "declaration of policy": the paper was to appear once a fortnight, but the twenty-five numbers we have took two years to appear. As early as No. 5 we find him apologizing: "*Cette feuille-ci a été retardée par des accidents, &c, &c,*" with a promise that it shall not occur again; but No. 7 has an advertisement informing us that "several months have elapsed" since the last number, and the same dismal confession again appears in No. 24. Nothing could be more characteristic of Marivaux. With the best intention of being industrious he could compass nothing but the idleness of genius—a better thing perhaps; with the kindest and most charming of characters he was renowned for the sharpness of his personal remarks and his acute distrust of others (to such an extent that a whisper in his presence offended him forever); and, finally, with a generosity and will to help others, rare in that selfish age, he was himself dependent on charity and journalistic expedients. The final paradox is that this eminently sincere character, whose minute analyses were a result of a scrupulous artistic conscience, this predecessor of the school of *nuances* has come down to us with the reputation of a literary *petit maître*, a man of graces and simpers, a sort of eighteenth century *précieux*. If Marivaux was a *précieux* then so was Flaubert, so were the Goncourts and Verlaine and Gautier and more than half the writers of the last century.

The paragraph quoted by Sainte-Beuve will be found in the third number of the *Spectateur Français*. It is a reflection, too long to quote, rather in Steele's manner, on the faces to be observed at a theatre exit. To a modern reader this appears an elegant and brightly-written paragraph, with some happy observations and carefully noted details; it is the kind of "sketch from the life" which has become commonplace under the title of *chose vue*. Sainte-Beuve objects to the phrases: "*porteurs de visages,*" "*l'occasion était-elle chaude,*" "*vient chercher noise,*" "*vous présente hardiment le combat,*" "*voudrait enfin accuser d'abus.*" One is tempted to inquire "where is the literary sin, where the affectation?" Compare the passage from which these phrases are taken with the most restrained sentences of a Huysmans or any

of the Symbolists, and Marivaux will appear by contrast of a classic purity and elegance. And this leads up to a most important problem. Obviously what is objected to by Sainte-Beuve and by the whole school of critics (of which he was simply one of the last and greatest) is the use of new and daring metaphorical language, unauthorized by previous usage. Undoubtedly there is an extreme and otherwise unobtainable charm in a style which is founded on "the best speech of the best people" but this very perfection of elegance conceals a corruption. Earlier seventeenth century critics like Bouhours rejoice because they have succeeded in robbing French of every one of the picturesque and metaphorical words for *avare* (*avaricieux*, *échars taquin*, *tenant*, *trop-tenant*, *chiche*, *chiche-vilain*, *pince-maille*, *racle*—*denare*, *serre-denier*, *pleure-pain*, *serre-mitte*, are some of them). Now when we consider the prodigious asset such a vast popular imagination has been to artists like Shakespeare and Rabelais, we can then judge of the castration of language, the weakening of literary strength, effected by the seventeenth century under pretense of perfection. These Vaugelas and Bouhours may be of immense service to us to-day, because they insisted on intellectual excellencies which the world has forgotten or contemns, but they make the fatal mistake (for speech) of imitating the refinements of the Italian Academies, which, more than all the Hapsburgs, destroyed the native vigor of Italian literature. These critics forgot that every word and every phrase was originally a metaphor; that what is ridiculous is not the new or striking metaphor but the worn or inept metaphor.

The complaint against Marivaux in his own time was that he *courait après l'esprit*. Stung by this ineptitude and by others even more foolish, founded on the stupid quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, Marivaux turned on his critics (or rather fault-finders) and wrote his seventh *Spectateur*, which is not only a brilliant defense of himself but a valuable and intelligent contribution to literary criticism. He begins by admitting that the chorus of condemnation had disgusted him with writing, and admits that this is simply vanity; though very natural vanity, we might add. He then proceeds to rebuke certain *a-priori* judgments and prejudices, which were just as powerful then as

their counterparts to-day. He complains of the fault-finder who "rises with a screwed and discontented face" to say "*Cela ne vaut rien*," or "*Cela est détestable*," without reflecting on the arrogance of such an unsupported judgment. Then he glances at the kind offices of friendship and thwart influences of enmities in deciding literary merits, the host of irrelevant details which bias judgment, so that criticism becomes a criticism of persons and not a criticism of books. And then he comes to his defense of an individual style which may be taken as the golden mean between servile imitation and incomprehensible jargon:

*Je crois pour moi, qu'à l'exception de quelques génies supérieurs, qu'ils n'ont pu être maîtrisés et qui leur propre force a préservés de toute mauvaise dépendance; je crois, dis-je, qu'en tout siècle, la plupart des auteurs nous ont moins laissé leur propre façon d'imaginer, que la pure imitation de certain goût d'esprit que quelques critiques de leurs amis avaient décidé la meilleure; ainsi, nous avons très rarement le portrait de l'esprit humain dans sa figure naturelle; on ne nous le peint que dans un état de contorsion; il ne va point sans pas, pour ainsi dire; il y a toujours une marche d'emprunt qui le détourne de ses voies, et qui le jette dans les routes stériles, à tout moment coupées, où il ne trouve de quoi se fournir qu'avec un travail pénible. S'il allait son droit chemin, il n'aurait d'autre soin à prendre, que de développer ses pensées; au lieu qu'en se détournant, il faut qu'il les compose, les assujettisse à un certain ordre incompatible avec son jeu, et qu'il écarte l'arrangement naturel qu'amènerait une vive attention sur elles.*

But a defense of Marivaux as eloquent, though not as reasonable, may be found in the homage of generations of writers and in the fact that his comedies still keep the stage and are still applauded as a link between Molière and Beaumarchais—a distinction he shares perhaps only with Regnard. For the *Spectateur Français*, it has most of the qualities and faults of its English predecessor. Its earlier numbers are least pleasing and it becomes most attractive when Marivaux discovers the device of a pilfered journal as a means for recording his disconnected but vivid observations of life. The failure of the venture was due to its irregular appearance and moral tales rather than to the influence of the purists. Apart from the admirable critical paper, the best of Marivaux's *Spectateurs* are those before he gets to his moral, where he recounts the life he knew so well.

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